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AUTHOR Gersten, Russell; Woodward, John
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated how schools and teachers attempt to meet the needs of language minority students and to utilize literature as a means to teach English language reading to students while building their English language capacities. Language arts and reading instruction was observed in 12 third- through fifth-grade classrooms in three elementary schools in a large urban school district in California. Two schools were primarily Hispanic, and the third had a wide range of immigrant groups. All participating classrooms were observed for 3 to 10 mornings over a period of two school years. Teachers were interviewed, and focus groups were conducted with groups of teachers working with the population. Results of classroom observations indicated that: (1) students faced the dual demands of learning to express ideas in a new language (both oral and written), as well as mastering the normal upper elementary grade curriculum while saving face; (2) teachers faced the multiple, potentially conflicting demands of assisting students with English language acquisition and developing cognitive skills and abilities; and (3) teachers were urged to implement innovative approaches to literacy, such as whole language or literature-based instruction, that are often difficult to implement even with highly motivated monolingual students. Interviews with the teachers revealed: limited belief that the students could independently create meaningful essays or interpretation of novellas; limited faith in their own ability to teach these students; and fairly superficial understanding of whole language and other process approaches. (Contains 37 footnotes.) (RS)

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Lost Opportunities:
A Study of the Education of Language Minority Students in the Intermediate Grades

Russell Gersten
University of Oregon
Eugene Research Institute

John Woodward
University of Puget Sound
Eugene Research Institute

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R. Gersten

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Abstract

Due to the large number of immigrants in recent years, many monolingual teachers find themselves teaching language minority students, often in inner city schools. These teachers are further challenged in that many of them are relative novices. This paper, based on observations and interviews in a large urban district, uses a case study approach to delineate the range of problems and issues these teachers confront. The complexities of utilizing a literature-based "whole language" approach to reading instruction, for students who are only beginning to master the English language, are also articulated. The paper documents the urgency and depth of the problems faced by both teachers and students. Some potential areas for concerted professional development are discussed.

For the last five minutes, Michael Wells has been moving quickly through the vocabulary words on the overhead. The rapid pace is designed to keep everyone attentive and to make sure that all of the "hard words" in the story have been defined before they begin reading Chapter 17.

Michael [pointing to the next word on the overhead]: "*snarl*:"

Luis volunteers: "tangle or knot."

Michael: "Right... *hind*"

Maria (from the side of the class): "back, rear."

Michael: "What would be the hind end of a dog?"

A murmur of answers follow, and Michael, seeming to acknowledge that most students understand, returns to the list: "*wince*."

When Michael provides the definition, he tries to ground it in everyday experiences, offering examples like the school nurse swabbing alcohol on a cut, only to have the injured child "*wince*." These are intermittent attempts to interject something relevant into the routine task .

Because they are reading novels and short stories in English for the first time, Michael feels that building vocabulary should be a primary concern. When we examine the chapter, it appears that many of the words selected were not necessarily central to understanding the chapter, but were chosen because they were likely to be unfamiliar to the students.

The rapidly paced give and take of word and definition continues for another ten minutes; most definitions the students provide are one word synonyms. Students had previously looked up the definitions in a dictionary.

Michael: "This sentence has the word *edge*. What's another name for edge? Who remembers? / Yes, *edge* means *brink*. What about *precious*? What does that word mean? /Yes, *valuable*, very *valuable*."

The last word on the list, *humble,* is problematic. The dictionary defined the word as "low in place or condition." Maria and Thomas had copied that definition and volunteer it as an answer.

Michael Wells sighs as he writes the phrase on the overhead, realizing that this definition, though correct, was too formal for students to understand. Groping for an alternative, he suggests:

> "The opposite of *humble* is *proud*. Do you know what *proud* means, Thomas? It's like what happens on a spelling test. If you don't do very well, you're *humbled*."

Michael does not re-direct his attention to either Maria or Thomas. It's unclear whether they really understand the concept, or how many other students got lost as he switched from synonym to antonym. Struggling to extricate himself and the increasingly listless students from the definition activity, Michael instructs the students to open their books to Chapter 17.

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In Michael Well's class of 32 fifth graders, all students are Hispanic except for one Caucasian boy, a special education student. The students in his "transition room" seem to speak English fairly clearly. (In fact, when fourth graders came by and asked for a *pincil,* they were teased and even ridiculed by class members for their accent.) But there are numerous problems in their written English language products -- a source of major concern to Michael.

When they were in the primary grades, the students' school day was in Spanish – save for a 45-minute English as a second language (ESL) lesson. This is the students' second year of predominantly English language instruction.

The shift from virtually all-Spanish to all-English instruction seems difficult, uneven and, at times, even tortuous for the students, as we observe them and Michael grinding through another chapter in *The Whipping Boy*. The

chapter contains a lot of unknown words, and comprehension of this fifth grade novel appears difficult for many. The vocabulary drill, which lasts as long as 25 minutes on some days, is of limited utility for truly understanding the nuances of the novels such as *James and the Giant Peach* and *Stone Fox* that serve as the core reading materials. There are portions of the lesson when Michael seems to founder as much as his students.

This is Michael Wells' second year teaching inner city Hispanic students. Three-fourths of the students in this inner city school of nearly 1000 are Hispanic. He perceives his job as helping the students make the transition into a school day that is predominantly in English. He envisions his major responsibility as preparing the students for junior high school. He worries about meeting that objective, fearing that he's unable " to teach everything that should be taught." Michael notes that his students are not prepared for standardized achievement tests, and that "it takes a long time to get the students to write a good complete sentence"-- one of his major goals. As we talk he laments:

> "There are days when I don't think what I do makes much difference to these kids. They have so many other things to deal with in their lives. Some days I don't think anything that I do ever gets through. But there are other days when I feel that if I at least teach the basics, I've done something."

Overview of the Problem

The situation in which Michael Wells finds himself is common in many areas of the country, particularly metropolitan areas such as New York and Los Angeles. During the last decade, the U. S. experienced the largest wave of immigration in its history. The 1990 census revealed that one out of every seven individuals over the age of 5 grows up speaking a language other than English[1].

One out of every four California students comes from a home where a language other than English is spoken.

This rapid escalation of second language students has overwhelmed many districts. Severe shortages of teachers with training in bilingual education or English-as-a-second language/sheltered English methodology have led to numerous monolingual teachers like Wells, with virtually no preparation, facing classes of Hispanic (or in some cases Southeast Asian) students.

In our view and the view of many others[2] the educational system is failing many of these students. Dropout rates for Hispanic students are extremely high[3], approaching 50 percent. And levels of academic achievement on standardized tests for the middle school/junior high school years are invariably low for many of the same students[4].

Statistics on the frequency of grade level retention are equally alarming. De la Rosa & Maw[5] report that one in four Hispanic eighth graders had repeated one grade, and 15 percent had repeated at least two grades. Clearly, there should be more effective means than grade level retention for assisting students in the transition to English language instruction.

In an attempt to address these problems, beginning in the 1990-1991 school year, the district -- following a mandate from the state department -- prescribed the use of a literature-based approach to reading/language arts instruction following the California Language Arts Framework[6]. The framework calls for the use of children's literature; basal readers and corresponding workbooks are eschewed.

The goal of this new approach is understanding and appreciation of the books and novels read, rather than the building of comprehension skills and other language-related skills (grammar, alphabetization, spelling) that underlied the basals of the 1980s. The framework calls for developing these skills in

meaningful contexts, i. e. using material from the novels read or students' writing, rather than workbooks. Expressive writing is to be emphasized; worksheet exercises on grammar, punctuation, definitions eradicated.

Previously the district had utilized a mastery learning approach to teaching reading in its inner city schools. This approach relied heavily on skills instruction, and on weekly assessment of student mastery of the content of the basal series. Thus the shift was particularly dramatic for teachers of low income, minority students in this city.

The literature-based approach has, by and large, been greeted enthusiastically by teachers[7]. It would appear sensible for second language students making the transition into English language reading from Spanish language reading to follow a loosely structured literature-based approach rather than a rigid, hierarchical basal skills sequence since these students' growth in English language reading fails to fit into the normal scope and sequence of traditional English language basals.

However, the district provided only the most minimal and cursory professional development activities related to the new approach. Teachers were left essentially to their own devices to grapple not only with a radically different approach to teaching reading and language arts, but also with the issue of how to adapt this approach for second language students, many of whom enter their classrooms with striking deficits not only in English language vocabulary but also in a host of language-related skills[8].

The research reported in this article is an attempt to begin to understand how schools and teachers currently attempt to meet the needs of these students and attempt to utilize literature as a means to teach English language reading to students while building their English language capacities. To understand these issues, we observed language arts and reading instruction in twelve classrooms

in a large urban school district in California. Grades three through five were intentionally selected because these are the years when many language minority students make the transition into mainstream instruction.

In order to understand the reasons for poor school performance in middle or junior high school, it seemed important to analyze and understand in some depth the reasons for the breakdowns that often occur in the years immediately prior to middle school. The best way to do this was to observe classroom practice in grades three through five for students making the transition into mainstream English language instruction and to interview those who teach them.

Observations were conducted in three elementary schools in a large urban school district in California. The majority of students in these schools were from low income families; the proportion of students eligible for free lunch ranged from 91% to 96%. Two schools were primarily Hispanic (76% and 77%). The third had a large range of immigrant groups: 44% were Hispanic, and approximately 25% came from several southeast Asian groups -- Cambodian, Lao, Vietnamese and Hmong. Between 12% and 21% of the students in each school were African-American and between 1% and 11% percent were Caucasian. Class sizes ranged from 28 to 34.

All of the twelve participating classrooms were observed for between three and ten mornings over a period of two school years. Of the twelve teachers observed, only two spoke Spanish. Three had at least twelve years teaching experience; the remaining nine were relatively new to teaching (i.e. within their first six years.)

During observations, the researchers always targeted one or two students whom the teacher thought were at risk for school failure. The observer specifically noted those students' performance during the lesson while simultaneously looking at the class as a whole.

Two researchers (the authors of this paper) observed in 10 of the 12 same classrooms. They also observed the identical classroom instructional situations jointly eight times. Joint observations allowed us to ascertain and discuss similarities and differences -- including some especially subtle differences -- in how we interpreted the instructional interactions we had just observed. Only by observing the same class the same day could we be reasonably sure we were discussing similar phenomena.

At times we became aware of how the same lesson seemed different when viewed from the perspective of different target students. These debriefings provided a venue for us to frame, reframe and verify working hypotheses. These joint observations and ongoing discussions continued for two years. Over time, a conceptual framework was developed and refined. The researchers utilized this framework as we took field notes, wrote up informal reports and analyzed the data[9].

Finally, the researchers interviewed teachers to develop a grasp of their concerns and their beliefs concerning teaching language minority students to read and write in English. These informal interviews were used as supplements to the observations describe in this article. Similar techniques have been used by Leinhardt[10] to better understand a teacher's instructional agenda. In addition, focus groups were conducted by members of the research team with groups of teachers working with this population.

The next sections present further examples of what we observed, and insights gained from the interviews. The major focus is on one classroom and one teacher, Michael Wells' and his fifth grade class. We add selected examples from other classrooms when relevant to present a broader perspective on key issues. These examples present the reader with the range of problems which the teachers -- and their students -- confront.

Issues Confronting the "Transition" Teachers

As we observed and spoke with the teachers and students, we were impressed by the scope and complexity of the issues encountered in these classrooms, which are often called "transition" rooms. Students are experimenting with expressing thoughts and information in what is often still a strange language. The fear of failure, of making some mistake in grammar, pronunciation or word order is often high. Because of this fear, many students play it safe and hesitate to volunteer.

Many teachers express confusion with the seemingly unpredictable rates of academic progress these students make in English. Although most classroom teachers confront classes of diverse learners, "transition" teachers experience not only the normal variability in ability and motivation, but also variability in the often unrelated phenomena of English-language ability.

The group of teachers we observed were also going through another transition -- from more traditional basal textbooks in reading and language arts to literature-based instruction. All were following their interpretation of the California Language Arts Framework[11] which calls for the use of novels as the core "text" for literacy instruction.

Each teacher we spoke to expressed great enthusiasm for the use of children's literature rather than conventional texts, and most indicated the books they were now using were more motivating for both their students and themselves. A major concern was their frustration with the extreme diversity in each class in both English language proficiency and reading ability. It was rare to find a book that was neither too hard for half the class nor too easy for the other half.

They also admitted that there were difficulties in teaching literature without the assistance of teachers' guides and with no discernible sequence for

building grammatical skills. Especially as the students advanced in their written English language development and wanted to produce pieces that were grammatically correct, teachers were consistently unsure how to structure their feedback and how to systematically teach grammatical skills in the context of literature. The fact that many of the teachers were inexperienced often exacerbated the problems.

Of the 12 transition teachers observed, only two were bilingual. District administrators told us this had not been the case five years ago. However, as the Spanish-speaking student population has increased, bilingual teachers typically have been assigned to the primary grades, where most instruction is in Spanish. Thus, most of the transition rooms are taught by monolingual English-speakers. Since most of the teachers do not speak Spanish, they are unable to assess what the students understand in their native language and can only hazard guesses as to understanding based on what a student produces in English.

Finally, many of the teachers confessed to feeling a distance between themselves and their students. They come from different countries, different cultures, different social classes, and different religious backgrounds than those that they taught.

This sense of distance, evidenced in Michael Wells' allusion to the students having "so many other things to deal with in their lives" was a prevalent feeling. Wells was not alone in feeling that often he wasn't sure whether anything ever "gets through" to his students. In this section, we return to selected observations of Michael's attempts to "get through."

A Return to Michael Wells' Classroom

For much of the lesson Michael alternates between reading long portions of a passage aloud and using a "round robin" technique in which students orally read one or two sentences each. When he reads, it is with expression. He is

careful to stress key words and critical information. Yet when students read, his focus shifts, and he becomes exclusively concerned with accurate decoding, correct answers to inserted literal comprehension questions, and how well students have remembered the definitions from the vocabulary drill. It is apparent that students have worked on accurate decoding for some time. Few make a mistake in the one or two sentences that they read aloud. In fact, measures of English language reading fluency for his students showed significant growth throughout the year[12].

As the comprehension segment of the lesson begins, however, Michael's uncertainty as to how to guide as well as maintain a discussion beyond a mechanical exchange of questioning by assessment[13] and limited responses becomes apparent.

He begins by asking students to generate predictions. A careful use of predictions can be the cornerstone of good comprehension instruction[14]. At first, Michael is patient in his questioning, allowing students time to think about an answer before they speak. He also is sensitive to the difficulties they exhibit as they attempt to compose an answer in English. However, after two or three students respond in short, clipped answers that only roughly approximate the type of response he is looking for, Michael tends to race through the activity. Soon, no time is taken to ask students to discuss the rationale behind their predictions. They are not recorded on the board so students can later assess whether the story confirmed their predictions.

The predictions segment of the lesson is followed by a series of disjointed questions Michael hopes will provoke some kind of response and get students to "think about" the story rather than merely read words.

Just before the story reading begins, Michael distributes a sheet of eight comprehension questions for today's chapter. Michael calls on Juanita for the first question. The questions, like the vocabulary words, come quickly.

"Why does Jemmy [a character in *The Whipping Boy*] feel the prince is brave?"

Her answer, like virtually all of the answers to these questions, is terse, "He didn't cry."

Without any discussion, Michael expands and elaborates her response in writing. He puts on the board, "Jemmy feels that the prince is brave because he didn't cry out." The class copies the answer.

Michael's questions rarely go beyond the bare rudiments of comprehension. To read a story or book and know the main events, a few details about the characters' motivation and goals seems to be his modest objective for these fifth graders.

The second question on the sheet enables Michael to review one of the vocabulary words previously presented on the overhead.

Michael: "Who can give me a vocabulary word that tells me what Petunia did?"

Raul volunteers: "Snarls."

Michael: "Good. What's a sound that Petunia may have made?"

Raul again: "Bellow."

Michael is pleased that Raul was able to remember another word previously discussed from the overhead, even though it was of dubious relevance. Michael says "good job" and moves on to the third question on today's worksheet. Michael's feedback is often of this order -- positive, but non-specific.

The fourth question provokes an exchange between Michael and one of his students. Asking Martha, "What happened to the coach?" he gets an acceptable, but limited answer. For elaboration, he calls on Roberto.

Michael: "What happened to the coach, Roberto? Can you tell me more?" Roberto, however, merely repeats what Martha has just said.

Abruptly, Michael reprimands Roberto before the entire class: "Don't repeat what she just said. Don't let her answer for you. I'll read it [the question] again."

The Semblance of Success

Further observations over several mornings suggest that Michael's frustration arises from a central problem that he has yet to resolve. He is prone to circumvent potential failure by accepting weak, limited answers or by providing correct answers which students can copy from the board. Michael is clearly bothered by the mimicking and perfunctory performance, but he rationalizes their difficulties (and his own) by reference to their difficult life circumstances. He told us, "I need to get them to realize that they have the ability to be successful... They'll drop out of school, join gangs... if they're not successful... People want to forget about these schools and the kids that are here."

Michael Wells does provide students experiences in which they are successful, and he does praise students for correct responses. However, students are praised for what they literally recall, not for analytic, context-dependent methods of answering the questions. Occasional attempts to push students to elaborate and expand often are unsuccessful, in part because he is unable to guide students with explicit strategies or supportive structures.

We also see an unresolved tension between his desire to have students read, think about what they read, and develop their English language vocabularies versus his concern that their written products be grammatically

correct, with proper English spelling and punctuation. There is a tension, perhaps one he doesn't fully recognize, between the lofty goals of the California Framework and the realities he confronts each morning in his classroom.

Michael seemed to unpredictably zig-zag between these two objectives -- at times stressing content over form, at other times, form over content. There is a tension, perhaps that he doesn't recognize, inherent in the framework. This was apparent as he quickly moved from asking prediction questions where students were given sufficient time to think about the answer to an onslaught of rapid fire literal comprehension questions similar to those in traditional basal reading instruction.

The remainder of the reading period is spent on an independent activity. Michael tells the students, "I want you to draw a picture about the chapter and write five sentences about your favorite part of the chapter." He tells them to make up their own 5 sentences, not to copy sentences from the book.

Nearly forty minutes are consumed with drawing and sentence writing. Many students approach Michael at his desk to ask what kind of sentences they were supposed to write, how long the sentences need to be, and whether they may copy the sentences from the chapter.

Even though Michael tells them not to copy, several students do. He never provides them with any strategy for deciding which sentences to pick, or indicates whether or not he wants a summary.

Copying, copying, copying -- that phrase permeates the field notes for the two lower-performing students in the fifth grade room. For example, Araceli copied a picture from the book, a few sentences from the book and then copied answers to some questions from a friend. After recess, she copied several formal, lengthy definitions from the board, and copied sentences from the board. Developmentally, imitation of a competent peer or adult can be a precursor to

independent activity -- and one can see real benefit for the students in reproducing accurate sentences in English. Yet Michael seemed to desparately struggle with developing a framework for slowly "pushing" students into a level where they felt comfortable creating as well as copying.

The mandate either to create or to copy prompts many students to copy. The fact that sentences copied from the book will be syntactically correct and properly spelled -- whereas even the most advanced students in the class will make errors in tense agreement and spelling when they create sentences on their own – provides great motivation for students to copy. Since large blocks of time during the language arts block each day are devoted to accuracy of English language production, students are sent a contradictory message.

Michael's growing frustration as his class founders with an assignment that was both ill-defined and too difficult contrasts with the fairly smooth progress during the earlier round robin reading and vocabulary activities. This illustrates a dilemma that he faces every day. For students who are thrust into this new, second language environment, the materials and the activities can be easily overwhelming. Thus, we can understand, if not condone, Michael Wells' tendency to drill the students on new vocabulary words with the hope that they will better comprehend the story, learn more English, and be in a better position to answer the comprehension questions in the district guide correctly.

Adaptation and Mediation

Modulating traditional assignments requires a level of planning and sophistication that elude a relatively inexperienced teacher like Michael. This type of adaptation and mediation involves relatively complex judgments -- selection of the three or four key words that are essential for understanding the chapter from a list provided by the district, understanding how to use story grammar elements and visual mapping techniques to guide students in their

development of summaries of a story, when to use cooperative learning groups so that students of mixed levels of English language proficiency can informally pool their knowledge.

Michael is prone to assign isolated, simply implemented activities that can be completed quickly. Eventual mastery of the material -- a goal and not necessarily a reality in his class -- is pursued through drills and continual, albeit superficial, review. The vocabulary exercises epitomize this pattern of instruction. Students look up words, they appear on an overhead, and ideally, students accurately restate their meaning when they appear in the story.

The cumulative effects of his instruction are assignments with little risk or challenge. Michael's tendency is to lower his sights, choosing some simplistic indication of success rather than more complex activities which might promote discussion or reflect a deeper interpretation of the text. At the extreme, students merely copy answers from the board, the dictionary, or the book to show that they *can* complete the assignment, and thus can succeed at something.

This tendency has been noted by Carter and Richardson[15] in their research on teachers of low income students. The researchers found that a typical response to the overwhelming pressures teachers like Michael Wells and his colleagues contend with is to manipulate:

> student work demands and accountability in subtle ways, *such as reducing risk by prompting students heavily...* by regularizing and familiarizing work patterns so that the intellectual effort students must expend to accomplish assignments is substantially reduced, and by negotiating down academic requirements[16].

The concern for students turning in a relatively "correct" (in terms of English language grammar and spelling and word order) product permeated many of the classrooms, not only Michael's. These teachers were faced with a very real dilemma. They wanted their students to be -- and feel -- successful in the areas of reading comprehension and writing. Yet they knew that when left to

their own devices most students would produce very brief, truncated prose. By allowing their models -- of stories, of answers to worksheet items -- to remain on the board, students could copy. Thus there was a sort of compromise negotiated between teacher and students.

An Unresolved Tension: The Process/Product Dichotomy

In the interviews and focus group, virtually every one of the twelve teachers talked about the importance of *process*, of encouraging students to express ideas and preferences, to analyze and summarize. Yet, in the reality of their day-to-day routines, they always seemed concerned with receiving proper written products. In fact, during a focus group conducted with five teachers, the discussion quickly turned to their fears and concerns that students were not writing proper grammatical sentences.

Merging concerns for product and process is complex. One of the more innovative and empathic teachers we observed displays this complexity. Joyce Davenport, more than any other teacher, was a strong advocate of contemporary process approaches and whole language techniques. She seldom utilized the whole class recitation mode that Michael Wells and most of his colleagues constantly gravitated towards. In fact, much of the time, students had the choice of working independently or in cooperative groups. The class had a much livelier – if sometimes chaotic -- feeling than most of the others.

On one morning we observed, Joyce was working on character attributes. She asked students to re-read the chapter about Captain Bill in the basal reader and note 5 to 10 important characteristics about him. We noted that, in the course of 30 minutes, most students only copied independently 2 or 3 adjectives from the book, and filled in the other 7 when they huddled in their cooperative groups.

We noted that the academic demands in Joyce's class were quite low for fifth graders. And in reality, many students wound up copying -- though in this case from their peers rather than from the teacher's model. Thus, despite a very different instructional approach, many of the same problems that Michael Wells faced recurred.

However, we perceived definite benefits to this more casual, cooperative approach. We focused on one group's activities. The main agenda of this group, like the others, was copying from peers to fill in the 7 or so blanks. However, one boy, Victor, had the word "nervous" on his sheet. A friend said, "That's wrong. Captain Bill is brave and strong. He never got nervous." Victor opened his book and provided the evidence. The other students found his argument compelling. All put the word "nervous" on their sheets.

Thus in the middle of a fairly mundane activity, there was evidence of genuine reading comprehension and constructive dialogue. We think -- or at least, as educators, we would like to think -- that Victor experienced the excitement of winning an argument and convincing others. A potentially routine and fruitless copying exercise became an opportunity for real learning.

Here was a case where the seeming simplicity of the task enabled at least *some* students to experience *some* of the risk and *some* of the joy of academic discourse. Sadly, this type of genuine dialogue occurred infrequently even in the rooms of the most innovative teachers.

Carter and Richardson perceive that many inner city teachers grapple with "the critical tensions between simultaneous attempts to maintain order and manage ...quality instruction"[17]. Some like Joyce continue to risk potential chaos; others like Michael retreat.

Understanding The Retreat

A language arts curriculum based on children's literature rather than a hierarchical basal skills approach has the potential for allowing teachers and students to develop what Greene[18] envisions as "concrete engagements in mind, actual and imagined" and for teachers to make the "imaginative efforts" that cross the distances and allow the teacher to "look through diverse others' eyes".

This approach is a potentially powerful venue for working with language minority students for several reasons. First, there is less of a focus on "covering" grade level material in a basal. Second, there is less emphasis on what a fourth or fifth grader "should" be learning and more emphasis on which novels, short stories, writing experiences or projects (regardless of grade level readability) are likely to stimulate and interest the individual students in a given class. Third, at least in theory, the framework provides for a major emphasis to be placed on discussion of relevant experiences and discussion of issues and themes in the story, allowing for the type of extended discourse on cognitively demanding material that bilingual educators believe is crucial for successful transfer of skills and knowledge from Spanish into English[19]. The focus should be less on accuracy than on understanding, so discussions that encourage expression of ideas regardless of grammatical sophistication would be acceptable and encouraged.

Naturalistic research[20] has found instances of monolingual teachers as well as bilingual Latino teachers using the liberties and freedom provided by new approaches towards literacy instruction to forge deep connections with their students, and to encourage students to cogently express their ideas both about stories read and their own lives. In this section, we attempt to explain why these meaningful connections between students and teachers so rarely occur[21].

Possible Reasons for the Retreat

There are several major reasons for the retreat from the potential richness, challenges and ambiguities inherent in literature-based instruction towards the relatively clipped, right/wrong atmosphere that so often typified Michael Wells' classroom (and those of many of his peers).

The first has to do with the students. The degree of risk-taking called for as language minority students make the transition into English language instruction in grades four and five is great[22]. As the ethnographic research of Moll[23] has demonstrated, during the first year or two of English language instruction, these students often cannot express their ideas fully or completely *in English*. Sometimes, they will come up with the wrong word, or an unusual or ungrammatical construction. Sometimes, they simply can't recall the appropriate English phrase and thus appear incompetent. They have a lot to lose and little to gain by volunteering. Thus, they often retreat into silence. They feel most comfortable reading definitions they have copied from a dictionary or text, or reading something the teacher has written.

Thus, it becomes difficult for teachers like Michael Wells or Joyce Davenport to "read" the students and use the information they provide in class to modulate instruction. The reticence, "the unnatural silences"[24] that so often occur in these classrooms make it easy for teachers to retreat into areas where there are clear right and wrong answers -- definitions, grammar, spelling, and punctuation. In these areas, the teacher can feel like a teacher, the one who knows the answers.

It is also important to note that the teachers -- ranging from Michael to Joyce -- *desire acceptable written products from students.* Their students are, after all, fourth or fifth graders. And neither they, the students, nor their parents feel very good about sentences with misspelled words and tense problems.

The teachers seem to have an implicit image in their minds of what a typical fourth or fifth grader should be doing, and they know these students fall short. This was reiterated numerous times by Michael Wells in his concern for his students succeeding in junior high school. Overwhelmed by the discrepancy between where the students are and where the teachers feel they should be by the end of the year, there is a tendency to fall back on highly traditional methods for teaching aspects of language arts. By emphasizing vocabulary development, grammar, and spelling, teachers can at least feel they are meeting these objectives. By allowing students to copy, even while "officially" discouraging them, "acceptable" written products emerge.

Yet it is an oversimplification to say that, while on the surface they use a literature-based approach, in reality they are reverting to a "skills"-based instructional approach. As the observations of Michael Wells' class demonstrate, teachers do not seem systematically to build grammatical and other language-related skills.

In the focus group discussions and interviews, most teachers indicated that they needed a means to improve the quality of students' written English language products. They all felt that the state guidelines and information presented at inservices -- where they are urged to develop skills "in context" -- was simply not working for them or their students. Few felt they had a good grasp on exactly which skills they wanted to teach, let alone how to teach them.

In our view, at least part of the solution is to provide teachers with a framework and structure for helping students develop their English language writing abilities without unduly frustrating them. In reviewing the journals of language minority students taught with a literature-based process approach, Reyes[25] noted the failure to provide adequate feedback to students on the formal

quality of their written work can become a source of distress for students, as well as teachers.

Yet this need for some type of focused instruction in language arts is only a small part of the problem. Palincsar et al.[26] and Englert et al.[27] have shown how systematic instruction can be joined with a rich literacy program for minority students that highlights personal expression and understanding of literature. Their research has also shown, however, that extensive professional development is required as teachers begin to slowly re-conceptualize how they teach...and begin to think abut their students in different ways.

As we reflected upon the two years of observations, a recurrent term that came up in discussions was 'lost opportunities.' So often, teachers shied away from the types of authentic encounters of the sort that Greene[28], Barrera[29], Moll[30] and Rueda[31] view as the crux of improving the achievement of language minority students.

For example, in three different classrooms, the issue of old clothes came up in novels read. In each case, the main character of the story, who was poor, was ashamed to attend a party because she only had old clothes. In each case, the teacher seemed overwhelmed at the issue of how to discuss poverty, knowing full well that many of his or her students often wore hand-me-down clothes.

Both teachers seemed temporarily upset by this rather naked invasion of real world social class issues. They shied away from confronting the issue by awkwardly telling the students how to think, rather than inquiring as to what the students felt and thought. They talked about how they sometimes wore old clothes, how there was nothing wrong with wearing old clothes, and the character really shouldn't have felt ashamed. Yet clearly, old, hand-me-down clothes can mean something very different to someone from the lower class than

they do to someone from the middle class. The novel focused on the girl's shame and humiliation at being the only one at the party with old clothes. The students often looked puzzled as the teachers attempted these uncomfortable explanations about why it was all right to wear old clothes. What the teacher provided seemed to us to be counterproductive to understanding the novel.

Observing these awkward encounters, we were left with the sense that the teachers had shied away from a meaningful encounter with their students and from an opportunity prompted by the literature to help students explore dimensions of their lives.

Greene[32] also reported observing numerous instances of these communication breakdowns between inexperienced mainstream teachers and minority students. Greene, like us, noted the "unnatural silences" that frequently follow these awkward interchanges and documents the negative impact these experiences often have on minority students.

In contrast, two teachers we observed (both veterans), did not sidestep the issue of poverty when it came up. These teachers allowed students to write about broken down television sets and broken down trucks, and to describe their thoughts and feelings on the impact of these losses on their lives. These teachers allowed the students to express their perspective on issues or events. Thus, the integrity of the experiences were maintained. In contrast, teachers like Michael Wells unwittingly preempted the students' expression of their perspective.

Again, merely allowing free expression of not-so-pleasant experiences is hardly a panacea to the complex tasks facing the teachers. But it does serve as a basis for beginning to break down barriers. Our observations consistently show that when teachers allow for this breakdown, students become less reticent.

The enormity of the challenge facing teachers like Michael Wells cannot be underestimated. Concerted and focused efforts are needed to assist him and his

colleagues to work effectively with the students they teach. Teachers have consistently told us the last thing they want is one more brief inservice on language acquisition theory, whole language or cognitive strategy instruction.

We envision several activities that can begin to ameliorate the multitudinous problems. Research can begin to provide a realistic sense of the stages that students go through in making the transition from Spanish to English and provide teachers with more reasonable expectations. School level support structures that actively encourage communication with the families could begin the process. A host of practical suggestions need to be shared with the teachers, with adequate time for discussion, and with specific feedback from fellow teachers on how the attempts at innovation are working in their classrooms[33]. As Wolcott[34] noted, it is simply too much to ask one teacher to overcome the many facets of difference between himself or herself and the students totally on his/her own.

Conclusions

After two years of intensive classroom observations, we remain convinced both of the severity of the difficulties in educating language minority students in inner city areas and the complexity of the problems faced by both the teachers and the students. Students face a dual demand -- learning to express ideas in a new language (both oral and written), as well as mastering the normal upper elementary grade curriculum while saving face. Often those charged with teaching them know little about Latino culture.

Teachers face multiple, potentially conflicting demands. The first is in assisting students with English language acquisition, the second is in developing cognitive skills and abilities. In addition, teachers are urged to implement innovative approaches to literacy, such as whole language or literature-based

instruction, that are often difficult to implement even with highly motivated monolingual students[35].

Implementation of process approaches is a real struggle faced by all teachers -- even highly experienced teachers[36] – in moving to an approach that focuses less on skills learned, content covered, and correctness of products and more on a student's construction of knowledge and creation of a setting where students feel free to express complex ideas and personal values.

The process approach has been advocated by many prominent bilingual educators[37]. Our research suggests that implementation of this approach with language minority students requires high degrees of sophistication, tolerance for ambiguity, and faith in the rationale behind the approach.

Interviews with the teachers revealed:

a) limited belief that the students could independently create meaningful essays or interpretation of novellas;

b) limited faith in their own ability to teach these students irrespective of instructional methods;

c) fairly superficial understanding of whole language and other process approaches.

For each of these findings, there were exceptions. However, the general deficiencies critically undercut the teacher's ability to achieve a classroom characterized by higher order thinking and natural dialogue.

It takes patience to allow students to paraphrase ideas in their own words, to experiment with linking current with prior knowledge. The patience to listen to these attempts (which are often conveyed through awkward phrases and simplified language) is often missing. Many of these teachers lack the ability to subtly guide students through the ambiguous steps in the thinking process.

The reasons for the retreat Michael and his colleagues make from the type of meaningful, cognitively demanding interactions that one would hope would occur in his fifth grade classroom are complex and multifaceted. Our belief is that by understanding the pressures, difficulties and concerns of teachers that lead to this retreat, one can begin to understand the type of professional development and curricula restructuring that might lead to more productive learning environments for the language minority students he and his colleagues teach.

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Footnotes

[1]Barringer, F. (April 28, 1993). When English is foreign tongue: Census finds a sharp rise in 80's. *New York Times*, 1,902(49, 315), pp. 1, 10.

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Suro, R. (1990, November 4). Hispanics in despair. *New York Times.*

[3]De La Rosa, D., & Maw, C. (1990). *Hispanic education: A statistical portrait.* Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza.

[4]Ibid

Gersten, R. & Woodward, J. (in press). A longitudinal study of transitional and immersion bilingual education programs in one district. *Elementary School Journal.*

[5]De la Rosa & Maw (1990)

[6]California State Department of Education (1988). *California language arts framework.* Sacramento, CA: Author.

[7]Cohen, D.K. (1992, December). *Reading policy.* Paper presented at 42nd Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.

Reyes, M. de la luz (1992). Challenging verable assumptions: Literacy instruction for linguistically different students. *Harvard Educational Review*, 62(4), 427-446.

[8]De la Rosa & Maw (1990)

[9]To create the framework, we drew on four key bodies of research: a) effective instructional interventions for at risk students [Garcia, G., Pearson, P., Jiménez, R. (1990). *The at risk dilemma: A synthesis of reading research.* Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Reading Research and Education Center.; Leinhardt, G. (1988). Expertise in instructional lessons: An example from fractions. In D.A. Grouws & T.J. Cooney (Eds.) *Prospectives on research on effective mathematics teaching* (pp. 48-64). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.], b) bilingual education and second language acquisition theory [Moll, L.C. (1988). Some key issues in teaching latino students. *Language Arts*, 65(5), 465-472.; Ortiz, A. A., & Wilkinson, C. Y. (1991). Assessment and intervention model for the bilingual exceptional student (AIM for the BESt). *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 14(1), 37-42.; Ramirez, J. D., Yuen, S. D., Ramey, D. R., Pasta, D. J. & Billings, D. (1990). *Final report: Longitudinal study of immersion strategy, early-exit and late-exit transitional bilingual education programs for language-minority children.* San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International.; Tikunoff, W. J. (1988). Mediation of instruction to obtain equality of effectiveness. In S. Fradd, & W. J. Tikunoff (Ed.), *Bilingual education and special education: A guide of instruction* (pp. 99-132). Boston: Little, Brown & Company.] c) cognitive strategy instruction [Palincsar, A. S., & Brown, A. L. (1984). Reciprocal teaching of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities. *Cognition and Instruction*, 1(2), 117-175.], and d) process approaches and literature-based methods for improving literacy [Reyes (1992); Pearson, P.D. (1989). Reading the whole-language movement. *The Elementary School Journal*, 90(2), 231-241.; Weaver, C. (1990). *Understanding whole language: From principles to practice.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.]. These bodies of knowledge could not be examined or used independently of each other in our research. All four bodies of

research were critical in our attempts to understand the success or failure of teachers in generating productive learning environments for language minority students.

The framework consisted of eight constructs -- challenge, involvement, success, scaffolding/cognitive strategies, mediation/feedback, collaborative/cooperative learning, techniques for second language acquisition/sheltered English, and respect for cultural and personal diversity.

The framework served the function that Patton called "sensitizing concepts." It helped organize dialogues between researchers and served as a springboard for analysis and discussion [Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, Second Edition. London: Sage.].

[10]Leinhardt (1988)

[11]California Department of Education (1988); Cohen (1992)

[12]Students were assessed bi-weekly on a curriculum-based measure of oral reading proficiency in English. For details, see Glang, Gersten & Morvant (1993).

[13]Duffy, G. G. (1983). From turn-taking to sense makening: Broadening the concept of reading teacher effectiveness. *Journal of Educational Research*, 76 (3), 134-139.

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[16]Ibid [pp. 411-412]

[17]Ibid [p. 412]

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Reyes, M. de la Luz, & Molner, L. A. (1991). Instructional strategies for second-language learners in the content areas. *Journal of Reading*, 35(2), 96-103.

[21]See also:

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Reyes (1992)

Knapp, M.S., Shields, P.M., & Turnbull, B.J. (1992). *Academic challenge for the children of poverty*. Summary Report for Study of Academic Instruction for Disadvantaged Students, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Policy and Planning.
for alternative, if complementary views.

[22]Ramirez et al. (1990)

[23]Moll (1988)

[24]Greene (1993) [p.17]

[25]Reyes (1992)

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[29]Barrera, R. (1984). Bilingual reading in the primary grades: Some questions about questionable views and practices. In T. H. Escobar (Ed.), *Early childhood bilingual education* (pp. 164-183). New York: Teachers College Press.

[30]Moll (1988)

[31]Rueda, R. (1990, July). Methodological considerations in multicultural research. Paper presented at Office of Special Education Projects Research Project Directors' Conference, Washington, D.C.

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